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Clinical Psychology Review 26 (2006) 321–345
CLINICAL PSYCHOLOGY REVIEW

A critical review of theories to explain violent relationship termination: Implications for research and intervention

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Accepted 19 September 2005

Abstract

The following review represents an update and extension to an influential article (see [Strube, M.J. (1988). The decision to leave an abusive relationship: Empirical evidence and theoretical issues. Psychological Bulletin, 104, 236–250.]), which evaluated empirical research and suggested potential theories to explain victimized women's decisions to terminate violent relationships. In contrast to the original review, this paper provides information on the importance of and means by which theory should be evaluated and critically determines which theoretical approach(es) might be most productive based on theoretical and atheoretical evidence. In addition, this paper discusses strengths and weaknesses of each approach, in light of certain criteria deemed to be important for the evaluation of theory (e.g., comprehensiveness, parsimony, etc.). Furthermore, this paper discusses current controversies regarding these issues, ramifications of differing theoretical approaches, and their potential impact on the field. Based on this analysis, it is determined that general approaches (e.g., reasoned action/planned behavior, investment model) may be better for understanding this complex and multifaceted decision. Suggestions for future theoretical and intervention research are discussed.

Over 15 years ago, a seminal article published in Psychological Bulletin (Strube, 1988) critically reviewed empirical research on women's decisions to leave violent relationships, highlighted methodological weaknesses inherent in this area of study, and suggested several psychological theories to explain the process of terminating for the purpose of encouraging future theoretical research on this important topic. The author concluded, based on his review of studies, that approximately 50% of help-seeking women returned to their abusive partners subsequent to receiving aide and suggested that, because of various methodological weaknesses, this rate of return might be underestimated. His conclusion underscored the need to investigate causal factors affecting women's decisions to leave, as a means to creating effective interventions designed to ameliorate the negative effects of abuse and/or reduce rates of continued victimization. His review also highlighted the importance of embedding these causal factors within a larger theoretical framework. Unfortunately, since that time little theoretical research on women's relationship termination decisions has been produced, in spite of continued interest in examining this issue (e.g., Anderson & Saunders, 2003; Barnett, 2001). In this paper we seek to correct this imbalance by renewing the call for theoretically based investigations of violent

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doi:10.1016/j.cpr.2005.09.002

relationship termination; we review relevant theories (including new ones not previously discussed) and consider them in light of more recent empirical work.

Interest in studying women's decisions to leave violent relationships likely stems from national epidemiological data on the prevalence and consequence of intimate partner violence. National estimates indicate that more than two million women are physically and/or sexually assaulted by intimate partners annually in the United States (Rennison & Welchans, 2000). In fact, the majority of violence against women (approximately 76%) is perpetrated by current or former spouses, cohabiting partners, or dates (Tjaden & Thoennes, 1998). Approximately one-third of assaulted women suffer physical injuries as a direct consequence of their partners' violence, with as many as one-third of those injuries requiring medical attention (U.S. Department of Justice, 1998). Medical intervention for injuries exceeds $3 billion per year (Domestic Violence for Health Care Providers, 1991), and many women develop psychological symptoms of depression, anxiety, posttraumatic stress, substance abuse, and suicidal ideation in response to being assaulted (Arias & Pape, 1999; Coker et al., 2002; Kessler, Sonnega, Bromet, & Hughes, 1995; Vitanza, Vogel, & Marshall, 1995).

Unfortunately, efforts to reduce intimate partner violence have not been particularly successful. Current interventions for demographically similar female victims (i.e., women in shelters) show considerable diversity across strategies and goals (e.g., Dutton, 1992; Sullivan & Bybee, 1999; Walker, 1994) and demonstrate modest success in reducing rates of continued victimization (see Wathen & MacMillan, 2003, for review). This suggests that researchers interested in assisting acutely battered women presently know little about the process of becoming violence-free (Sullivan & Bybee, 1999). By comparison, batterer interventions aimed at reducing male partner violence demonstrate greater consistency; however, meta-analytic data on their effectiveness similarly suggest minimal improvement in reducing violent outcomes (Babcock, Green, & Robie, 2004). Given its high prevalence, negative consequences, inconsistency across intervention strategies and limited treatment success, intimate partner violence constitutes an important social problem in need of clinical attention and intervention research.

It is our belief that future victim intervention efforts should adopt a theoretical approach to eliminating partner violence. Theoretical frameworks provide "...an orientation for what to look for, determine which variables are relevant and which are not, and assist in the formulation of testable hypotheses" (Pedhazur & Schmelkin, 1991, p. 181). Such frameworks differ from individual hypotheses, which may be interesting, intuitive and based on past data, but may not provide an overarching framework or an understanding of causal mechanisms. In contrast to hypotheses, theoretical models should, by definition, inform the content of victim interventions in such a way as to reduce inconsistency among approaches and strategies (Lundy & Grossman, 2001). Furthermore, if initial intervention attempts do not succeed, theory provides a framework from which to determine limitations and develop improvements. Researchers cannot know how to modify their treatments if they do not understand the causal relations among their intervention targets and outcomes. This is essentially the reason why Strube (1988) emphasized the importance of identifying the factors that distinguished battered women who remained in their relationships from those who left. He suggested that, for victims, reducing intimate partner violence likely required relationship termination, and it was important to understand, from a theoretical perspective, how some women managed to do it.

Taking the approach that victimized women should attempt to leave their violent partners rouses controversy within the field. Some have argued that encouraging termination erroneously blames victims for their misfortunes because of its focus on their behavior or personalities. It is true that early research on relationship termination examined battered women's supposed "masochistic" tendencies and negative personality traits, which were thought to distinguish them from non-battered women and affect their motivation to leave (see Anderson & Saunders, 2003; Rhodes & McKenzie, 1998, for reviews). This perspective pathologized women and oversimplified the complicated and dangerous process of terminating violent relationships. In contrast, more recent empirical articles and reviews avoid victim-blaming by reframing the research question from "Why do women stay?" which reflects an early, unsophisticated view to "How is it that some women *are able* to leave?" (Anderson & Saunders, 2003). Furthermore, much of the current data on relationship termination decisions, as will be demonstrated, has contributed to a more compassionate stance toward victimized women and the difficulties they face in terminating violent relationships.

Another argument raised by researchers and clinicians stems from data showing that intimate partner violence may increase following relationship separation (see Anderson & Saunders, 2003, for review). Restraining orders commonly fail to protect women adequately (e.g., Harrell & Smith, 1996), and issues such as child custody complicate separation and increase the likelihood of continued victimization (Stahly, 1999). Victimized women who leave often experience increased levels of psychological distress, not only in response to their continued vulnerability to abuse, but also in response to secondary stressors such as changes in family responsibilities and income loss (Anderson &

Saunders, 2003). Indeed, we concur that it is extremely important for professionals to be aware that terminating violent relationships may not necessarily eliminate partner violence or reduce women's emotional distress; however, reducing women's distress in the absence of their continued safety is a nearly impossible task. Unfortunately, researchers have been able to offer little in terms of facilitating women's continued safety from either a practical or theoretical standpoint. Furthermore, recent evidence suggests that increased face-to-face contact between women and their partners heightens the risk for continued victimization (Fals-Stewart, Lucente, & Birchler, 2002). Therefore, given what is known at this point, the best approach to assisting acutely victimized women may be reducing future contact with their male perpetrators by encouraging them to leave.

To this end, we intend to review and discuss extant empirical data on victimized women's decisions to leave violent relationships for the purpose of drawing preliminary conclusions and demonstrating the importance of theoretical approaches. We plan to examine the benefits of applying theoretical paradigms from a scientific perspective, and in so doing, review and critique existing theoretical models. Our discussion will focus not only on theoretical and atheoretical evidence supporting or refuting the theories, it will also highlight their unique strengths and weaknesses. Based on our conclusions, we plan to suggest future avenues for research and provide thoughts on clinical implications.

1. Empirical data on victimized women's decisions to leave

Quantitative studies on this topic commonly evaluate psychosocial variables of interest to researchers that are thought to be related to or predictive of the decision to leave. These variables, or empirically supported factors as we have termed them, are not unlike "research hypotheses or conjectural statements" (Pedhazur & Schmelkin, 1991, p. 194). They are distinct from theoretical models as they do not provide a broad, overarching framework within which women's relationship termination decisions can be understood. For example, many studies have hypothesized that women's early life experiences, such as childhood victimization, likely impact later relationship termination decisions in violent adult relationships (e.g., Pagelow, 1981). A social learning approach (Bandura, 1977b) might provide a theoretical context for hypothesizing such an association (i.e., women exposed to more childhood abuse may be more tolerant of violence in adult relationships), but finding a statistically significant association does not constitute a test of that theoretical approach, only a test of that particular hypothesis. Furthermore, such a hypothesis may be consistent with more than one theoretical approach (e.g., learned helplessness or psychological entrapment). Thus, many of the empirically supported factors we intend to review may be informed by theories, but do not constitute theories themselves.

An extensive search of existing research studies (e.g., examination of databases containing scientific articles, citations from previous reviews, and reference sections of relevant articles) was conducted in an effort to identify factors shown to be consistent with women's violent relationship termination decisions. Published studies examining some aspect of victimized women's decisions (i.e., intentions, decisions at shelter exit, actual behavior) were included. Published studies discussing other factors, such as lack of support in the workplace or inadequate support from health practitioners, which present significant challenges to victimized women (see Barnett, 2001, for review) will not be addressed here, mainly because such factors have not been explicitly tested against women's decisions, intentions, or subsequent behavior. Furthermore, theoretical studies, or studies relevant to theories reviewed later (see as examples Rusbult & Martz, 1995; Walker, 1983), were also excluded from this section to avoid overestimating the significance of any one theoretical approach.

To provide organization to this section, we arranged individual factors into several broad categories as identified by leading researchers in the field (e.g., Hotaling & Sugarman, 1986; Schumacher et al., 2001), namely *victim factors*, *perpetrator factors*, and *couple-level factors* (see Table 1). This seemed to be a relatively simple, straightforward manner for organizing an atheoretical, cross-disciplinary area of research. As can be seen from the table, most studies examined factors specific to the victims themselves (47 studies) rather than factors specific to perpetrators (13 studies) or their relationships (32 studies).

1.1. Victim factors

Eighteen studies examined victims' attempts to cope with the violence perpetrated against them. Specifically, women who maintained negative, partner-blaming attributions regarding violent episodes, as opposed to exculpatory or self-blaming attributions, more often reported intending to or having left violent relationships (Andrews & Brewin, 1990; Gordon, Burton, & Porter, 2004; Herbert, Silver, & Ellard, 1991; Katz, Arias, Beach, Brody, & Roman, 1995;

Table 1
Summary of atheoretical empirical studies

Study	Sample	Design	Outcome	Correlates of leaving
VICTIM coping strategies				
Aguirre, 1985	312 shelter residents	Cross-sectional	Intentions to leave at shelter exit	More decisions made at shelter such as obtain a protective order, press assault charges, etc.
Andrews & Brewin, 1990	70 community sample women	Cross-sectional	Compared 51 women who left with 19 who stayed	Less self-blame
Compton et al., 1989	141 shelter residents	T1: intake T2: shelter exit	Intentions to leave at shelter exit	Longer shelter stay, more previous separations
Follingstad et al., 1992	234 women affiliated with shelter	Cross-sectional	Compared 201 women who left with 33 who stayed	Less likely to deny the negative effects of abuse, more likely to have a plan following 1st violent episode
Frisch & MacKenzie, 1991	46 shelter residents	Cross-sectional	Compared 23 formerly abused women with 23 chronically abused	More likely to have received counseling, more likely to feel as though they contributed to violence against them.
Gordon et al., 2004	121 shelter residents	Cross-sectional	Intentions to return (5-item questionnaire)	Less forgiveness of partners
Herbert et al., 1991	130 community sample women	Cross-sectional	Compared 86 women who left with 44 women who stayed	Lesser extent of perceiving relationships as "bad" relative to others' relationships, more partner attributions for violence, more manipulatory attributions for positive partner behaviors, fewer personal attributions for abuse, **situational attributions for abuse (ns)**
Hilbert & Hilbert, 1984	35 shelter residents	Cross-sectional	Intentions to leave at shelter exit	Longer shelter stay
Hilbert et al., 1997	216 shelter residents	Cross-sectional	Intentions to leave at shelter exit	Longer shelter stay, **victims' thoughts/plans of suicide (ns), victims' abuse of drugs/alcohol (ns)**
Horton & Johnson, 1993	185 community women	Cross-sectional	Compared 158 women who left with 27 women who stayed	More likely to have sought help from community agencies
Katz et al., 1995	66 married couples	Cross-sectional	Marital Status Inventory (thoughts, plans and action to divorce)	More partner causal and responsibility attributions for violence
Lesser, 1990	58 shelter residents	Cross-sectional	Length of time apart from mate following shelter exit	More time at shelter apart from mate, greater use of shelter services following shelter stay
Okun, 1988	300 shelter residents	Longitudinal with 1-year follow-up	Relationship status at follow-up	More prior separations, more recent separations, longer-lasting separations, **victims' previous exposure to psychotherapy (ns)**
Pape & Arias, 2000	68 shelter residents	Cross-sectional	Intentions to leave	Responsibility and causality attributions, more nervous in response to violence
Rounsaville, 1978	31 women receiving services from ER and mental health center	Cross-sectional	Relationship status at time of data collection	Any contact with police
Schutte et al., 1986	17 shelter residents	Cross-sectional	Intentions to leave at shelter exit	Less likely to make situational attributions for violence
Schutte et al., 1988	117 shelter residents	Cross-sectional	Intentions to leave at shelter exit	More separations, more shelter stays
Snyder & Scheer, 1981	74 shelter residents	T1: intake T2: 6–10 weeks post-discharge	Relationship status 6–10 weeks post shelter stay	More previous separations
VICTIM exposure to abuse as child				
Aguirre, 1985	312 shelter residents	Cross-sectional	Intentions to leave at shelter exit	**Exposure to abuse as child (ns)**

Gelles, 1976	41 women from various sources	Cross-sectional	Relationship status at time of data collection	More exposure to interparental violence
Lesser, 1990	58 shelter residents	Cross-sectional	Length of time apart from mate following shelter exit	Less exposure to interparental violence
Okun, 1988	300 shelter residents	Longitudinal with 1-year follow-up	Relationship status at follow-up	**Exposure to abuse as child (ns)**
Pagelow, 1981	350 shelter residents	Cross-sectional	Length of cohabitation after 1st violent incident	More exposure to abuse as child
Schutte et al., 1988	117 shelter residents	Cross-sectional	Intentions to leave at shelter exit	More exposure to abuse as child
Strube & Barbour, 1984	251 women seeking counseling via an attorney's office	T1: intake T2: 2–3 months following intake	Relationship status at follow-up	**Exposure to abuse as child (ns)**
VICTIM resources				
Aguirre, 1985	312 shelter residents	Cross-sectional	Intentions to leave at shelter exit	Greater economic independence
Compton et al., 1989	141 women admitted to YWCA shelter	Time 1: intake Time 2: shelter exit	Intentions to leave at shelter exit (live with batterer, friends/family, independent living)	Better health
Follingstad et al., 1992	234 women affiliated with the shelter	Cross-sectional	Compared 201 women who left with 33 who stayed	Less social support
Frisch & MacKenzie, 1991	46 shelter residents	Cross-sectional	Compared 23 formerly abused women with 23 chronically abused	Employment, more years of education, **victims' income rating (ns)**
Gelles, 1976	41 women from various sources	Cross-sectional	Relationship status at time of data collection	Employment
Goudolf, 1988	6,612 shelter residents	Cross-sectional	Intentions to leave at shelter exit	Greater economic independence (transportation, child care, own income)
Griffing et al., 2002	90 shelter residents	Cross-sectional	Compared women previously separated to those who had never been separated	Less economic need
Herbert et al., 1991	130 community sample women	Cross-sectional	Compared 86 women who left with 44 women who stayed	**Employment (ns)**
Hilbert & Hilbert, 1984	35 shelter residents	Cross-sectional	Intentions to leave at shelter exit	Presence of personal income
Horton & Johnson, 1993	185 formerly abused community women	Cross-sectional	Compared 158 women who left with 27 women who stayed	More social support, employment
Johnson, 1992	412 shelter residents	Cross-sectional	Intentions to leave at shelter exit	Employment, **personal income (ns), years of education (ns)**
Lesser, 1990	58 former shelter residents	Cross-sectional	Length of time apart from mate following shelter exit	Greater economic independence
Martin et al., 2000	70 shelter residents	Cross-sectional	Women's perceptions about their own chances of leaving	**Years of education (ns)**
Okun, 1988	300 shelter residents	Longitudinal with 1-year follow-up	Relationship status at follow-up	Greater economic independence
Schutte et al., 1988	117 shelter residents	Cross-sectional	Intentions to leave at shelter exit	More years of education
Strube & Barbour, 1983	98 women seeking counseling via an attorney's office	T1: intake T2: 1–18 months following intake	Relationship status at follow-up	Employment, **housing options (ns)**

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Table 1 (*continued*)

Study	Sample	Design	Outcome	Correlates of leaving
Strube & Barbour, 1984	251 women seeking counseling via an attorney's office	T1: intake T2: 2–3 months following intake	Relationship status at follow-up	Employment, less economic hardship, housing options
VICTIM attitudes, perceptions, views				
Frisch & MacKenzie, 1991	46 shelter residents	Cross-sectional	Compared 23 formerly abused women with 23 chronically abused	Less traditional attitudes about women's roles, higher self-esteem, felt less controlled by outside forces
Johnson, 1992	412 shelter residents	Cross-sectional	Intentions to leave at shelter exit	More positive perceptions of themselves
Lesser, 1990	58 former shelter residents	Cross-sectional	Length of time apart from mate following shelter exit	Less anxious attachment
Snyder & Scheer, 1981	74 shelter residents	T1: intake T2: 6–10 weeks post-discharge	Relationship status 6–10 weeks post shelter stay	Catholic religion
PERPETRATOR behavior				
Aguirre, 1985	312 shelter residents	Cross-sectional	Intentions to leave at shelter exit	Perpetrator not in counseling
Gondolf, 1988	6,612 shelter residents	Cross-sectional	Intentions to leave at shelter exit	Perpetrator not in counseling
Gordon et al., 2004	121 shelter residents	Cross-sectional	Intentions to return (5-item questionnaire)	More perpetrator maliciousness
Gortner et al., 1997	60 married couples	Longitudinal with 2-year follow-up	Relationship status at follow-up	Perpetrator more contemptuous, displayed less humor, showed less neutral affect and more global negative affect in couple interactions Perpetrator more antisocial, histrionic, and narcissistic
Lesser, 1990	58 former shelter residents	Cross-sectional	Length of time apart from mate following shelter exit	Perpetrator classified as alcoholic
Okun, 1988	300 shelter residents	Longitudinal with 1-year follow-up	Relationship status at follow-up	**Perpetrators' participation in counseling (ns)**
Rounsaville, 1978	31 women receiving services from ER and mental health center	Cross-sectional	Relationship status at time of data collection	**Perpetrators' psychiatric history (ns)**
Stroshine and Robinson	307 women whose partners were arrested	Cross-sectional	Previous attempts at ending relationship	Presence of weapons in home, perpetrators who stalked victims
Strube & Barbour, 1983	98 women seeking counseling via an attorney's office	T1: intake T2: 1–18 months following intake	Relationship status at follow-up	Perpetrator did not promise to change
PERPETRATOR resources				
Compton et al., 1989	141 shelter residents	T1: intake T2: shelter exit	Intentions to leave at shelter exit	Perpetrator unemployed
Herbert et al., 1991	130 community sample women	Cross-sectional	Compared 86 women who left with 44 women who stayed	Lower family income
Johnson, 1992	412 shelter residents	Cross-sectional	Intentions to leave at shelter exit	Lower family income
Okun, 1988	300 shelter residents	Longitudinal with 1-year follow-up	Relationship status at follow-up	Perpetrator unemployed and lower perpetrator education level

COUPLE dynamics				
Bauserman & Arias, 1992	30 abused and 58 nonabused community sample women	Cross-sectional	Marital Status Inventory (thoughts, plans, and action to divorce)	Less marital satisfaction, more failed investment (as measured by efforts to resolve conflict)
Compton et al., 1989	141 shelter residents	T1: intake T2: shelter exit	Intentions to leave at shelter exit	Fewer years married
Frisch & MacKenzie, 1991	46 shelter residents	Cross-sectional	Compared 23 formerly abused women with 23 chronically abused	**Length of relationship (ns)**
Gordon et al., 2004	121 shelter residents	Cross-sectional	Intentions to return (5-item questionnaire)	Lesser constraint as measured by owning a home, social pressures, availability of other partners, and morality of divorce
Gortner et al., 1997	60 married couples	Longitudinal with 2-year follow-up	Relationship status at follow-up	Less marital satisfaction
Griffing et al., 2002	90 shelter residents	Cross-sectional	Compared women previously separated to those who had never been separated	Less emotional attachment
Herbert et al., 1991	130 community sample women	Cross-sectional	Compared 86 women who left with 44 women who stayed	Fewer positive aspects of relationship (e.g., trust, love, respect)
Hilbert & Hilbert, 1984	35 shelter residents	Cross-sectional	Intentions to leave at shelter exit	Shorter relationship
Katz et al., 1995	66 married couples	Cross-sectional	Marital Status Inventory (thoughts, plans and action to divorce)	Less marital satisfaction
Martin et al., 2000	70 shelter residents	Cross-sectional	Women's perceptions about their own chances of leaving	**Length of relationship (ns)**
Okun, 1988	300 shelter residents	Longitudinal with 1-year follow-up	Relationship status at follow-up	**Length of the relationship (ns)**
Rounsaville, 1978	31 women receiving services from ER and mental health center	Cross-sectional	Relationship status at time of data collection	**Marital status (ns)**
Snyder & Scheer, 1981	74 shelter residents	T1: intake T2: 6–10 weeks post-discharge	Relationship status 6–10 weeks post shelter stay	Shorter marriage
Strube & Barbour, 1983	98 women seeking counseling via an attorney's office	T1: intake T2: 1–18 months following intake	Relationship status at follow-up	Shorter relationship, less love for partner
Strube & Barbour, 1984	251 women seeking counseling via an attorney's office	T1: intake T2: 2–3 months following intake	Relationship status at follow-up	Shorter relationship, less love for partner
COUPLE violence by type, frequency and severity				
Aguirre, 1985	312 shelter residents	Cross-sectional	Intentions to leave at shelter exit	**Injury (ns)**
Arias & Pape, 1999	68 shelter residents	Cross-sectional	Intentions to leave at shelter exit	More psychological abuse
Compton et al., 1989	141 shelter women	T1: intake T2: shelter exit	Intentions to leave at shelter exit	More years of abuse
Follingstad et al., 1992	234 women affiliated with the shelter	Cross-sectional	Compared 201 women who left with 33 who stayed	Severe injury following 1st violent episode, shorter duration of abuse, shorter time in relationship before 1st violent episode

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Table 1 (*continued*)

Study	Sample	Design	Outcome	Correlates of leaving
Gelles, 1976	41 women from various sources	Cross-sectional	Relationship status at time of data collection	More frequent and severe violence
Gondolf, 1988	6612 shelter residents	Cross-sectional	Intentions to leave at shelter exit	**Frequency of physical violence (ns)**
Gordon et al., 2004	121 shelter residents	Cross-sectional	Intent to return (5-item questionnaire)	More frequent violence
Gortner et al., 1997	60 married couples	Longitudinal with 2-year follow-up	Relationship status at follow-up	More psychological abuse
Herbert et al., 1991	130 community sample women	Cross-sectional	Compared 86 women who left with 44 women who stayed	More frequent severe violence, more frequent verbal abuse, less love and affection
Hilbert & Hilbert, 1984	35 shelter women	Cross-sectional	Intentions to leave at shelter exit	More frequent violence
Hilbert et al., 1997	216 shelter residents	Cross-sectional	Intentions to leave at shelter exit	More severe violence
Horton & 0Johnson, 1993	185 formerly abused community women	Cross-sectional	Compared 158 women who left 27 women who stayed	More severe and frequent violence
Johnson, 1992	412 shelter residents	Cross-sectional	Intentions to leave at shelter exit	Less severe violence, **frequency of violence (ns)**
Okun, 1988	300 shelter residents	Longitudinal with 1-year follow-up	Relationship status at follow-up	**Frequency and severity of violence (ns)**
Pape & Arias, 2000	68 shelter residents	Cross-sectional	Intentions to leave at shelter exit	Increased frequency and severity of violence
Pagelow, 1981	350 shelter residents	Cross-sectional	Length of cohabitation after 1st violent incident	Less severe injuries
Rounsaville, 1978	31 women receiving services from ER and mental health center	Cross-sectional	Relationship status at time of data collection	More severe violence, more fear of being killed
Schwartz, 1988	Selected subsample of the National Crime Survey	Cross-sectional	Relationship status at time of interview	More frequent violence, **extent of injury (ns), severity of abuse (ns)**
Snyder & Scheer, 1981	74 shelter residents	T1: intake T2: 6–10 weeks post-discharge	Relationship status 6–10 weeks post shelter stay	**Frequency and severity of violence (ns)**
Strube & Barbour, 1983	98 women seeking counseling via an attorney's office	T1: intake T2: 1–18 months following intake	Relationship status at follow-up	**Fear of partner (ns)**

Nonsignificant results are noted in **bold text** followed by (ns). Also, nonsignificant results are noted, only if reported.

Pape & Arias, 2000; Schutte, Bouleige, & Malouff, 1986). Among studies reporting effect sizes, women's attributions, if negative and/or partner-blaming, showed medium to large effects with termination intentions at the bivariate level (i.e., effects ranging from .43 to .68) (Gordon et al., 2004; Katz et al., 1995; Pape & Arias, 2000; Schutte et al., 1986). Mediational analysis additionally suggested that attributions for violent episodes might only be important in that they contribute to women's willingness to forgive partners for their violent behavior (Gordon et al., 2004). Longer shelter stays (Compton, Michael, Krasavage-Hopkins, Schneiderman, & Bickman, 1989; Hilbert & Hilbert, 1984; Hilbert, Kolia, & VanLeewen, 1997; Schutte, Malouff, & Doyle, 1988) and more prior separations (Compton et al., 1989; Lesser, 1990; Okun, 1988; Schutte et al., 1988; Snyder & Scheer, 1981) also consistently predicted victims' intentions following a shelter stay. Results of one analysis demonstrated small (r=.25) and medium (r=.35) effects for separations and shelter stays, respectively (Schutte et al., 1988). Other coping strategies such as victims' exposure to therapy (Frisch & MacKenzie, 1991), use of shelter services following a shelter stay (Lesser, 1990), and police contact (Rounsaville, 1978), predicted an increased likelihood of terminating violent relationships; however, it should be noted that not all studies reported significant findings for women's exposure to therapy (Okun, 1988). Taken together, results suggest that women who maintain negative attributions concerning their partners' violent behavior and those who attempt separation and/or use the shelter system (as well as other types of support services) report greater intentions to leave their violent relationships than do women who maintain more positive attributions and those who do not use various community services available to them.

Seven studies examined the relation between women's childhood victimization, either as a witness to interparental abuse and/or as a victim of child abuse, and their decisions to terminate adult relationships with mixed outcomes. Although researchers generally expect that women exposed to more childhood violence will report decreased intentions to terminate, most studies have not found this association (see as exception Lesser, 1990). Most, in fact, report little association between abuse in childhood and relationship termination decisions in adulthood (Aguirre, 1985; Okun, 1988; Strube & Barbour, 1984) or find that abuse in childhood predicts increased intentions to terminate violent adult relationships (Gelles, 1976; Pagelow, 1981; Schutte et al., 1988). Schutte and colleagues, whose findings supported this latter view, found a small effect (r=.20) for childhood abuse and termination decisions.

Seven studies examined victims' employment and five examined victims' economic independence as potential predictors of decisions to leave. Generally, results show that women with greater economic advantages choose to leave violent relationships more often than women without those advantages, presumably due to their ability to financially support themselves and their children (Aguirre, 1985; Frisch & MacKenzie, 1991; Gelles, 1976; Gondolf, 1988; Griffing et al., 2002; Herbert et al., 1991; Horton & Johnson, 1993; Johnson, 1992; Lesser, 1990; Okun, 1988; Strube & Barbour, 1983, 1984). Results are somewhat mixed for victims' personal income and education, with some showing support (Frisch & MacKenzie, 1991; Hilbert & Hilbert, 1984; Schutte et al., 1988) and others not (Frisch & MacKenzie, 1991; Johnson, 1992; Martin et al., 2000). Similarly, results demonstrate lesser consistency among correlates such as victims' housing options and social support (Follingstad, Hause, Rutledge, & Polek, 1992; Horton & Johnson, 1993; Strube & Barbour, 1983, 1984). Mixed evidence with regard to some of these correlates is most likely the result of differences in measurement across studies (e.g., amount of income versus presence or absence of income, etc.). In fact, it has been suggested that women's economic resources may be one of the most influential and important predictors of their later decisions to terminate their relationships due to the general consistency of results found in these various studies (Anderson & Saunders, 2003). However, as will be discussed below, it should be noted that many studies involved women living in battered women's shelters in significant need of resources; therefore, this association may not be broadly generalizable across all types of victimized women (e.g., those from higher socio-economic groups).

Four studies suggested that victims with less traditional attitudes regarding women's roles (Frisch & MacKenzie, 1991), those with higher self esteem (Frisch & MacKenzie, 1991; Johnson, 1992), less anxious attachment (Lesser, 1990) and an internal locus of control (Frisch & MacKenzie, 1991) report greater intentions to leave violent partners than do victims without these perceptions. Traditional values or beliefs regarding marriage, more common among Catholic women, are also related to termination decisions (Snyder & Scheer, 1981); it has been suggested that such beliefs should be considered a form of "moral commitment" to marriage (Johnson, 1999).

1.2. Perpetrator factors

Seven studies report that men who behave in an overly negative or contemptuous manner toward their female partners and possess pathological personality traits (Gordon et al., 2004; Gortner, Berns, Jacobson, & Gottman, 1997),

keep weapons in the home (Stroshine & Robinson, 2003), stalk their female partners (Stroshine & Robinson, 2003), neglect to participate in batterer intervention programs (Aguirre, 1985; Gondolf, 1988) or do not promise to change (Strube & Barbour, 1983), and are classified as alcoholics (Lesser, 1990) are more often involved with female partners who report the desire to leave. Thus, there appears to be some evidence to substantiate the idea that violent male partners may influence victims' decisions to terminate their relationships, making decisions contingent, at least to some extent, on the actions of others. Certainly, it makes intuitive sense that negative perpetrator behaviors, which are indicative of potential violence (e.g., keeping weapons in the home or stalking), may be predictive of relationship stability, but it also seems that positive behaviors (or lack thereof) (e.g., perpetrators' participation in counseling) are predictive as well. In fact, Gondolf (1988) found that, among over 6,000 shelter women, perpetrators' participation in counseling was one of the most important predictors in determining women's stay/leave decisions (however, see Okun, 1988). Finally, there is also evidence to suggest that perpetrators' employment status (Compton et al., 1989; Okun, 1988), education level (Okun, 1988), and family income (Herbert et al., 1991; Johnson, 1992) are related to women's decisions, suggesting that perpetrators who contribute financially to the household promote increased relationship stability among their female partners.

1.3. Couple factors

Fourteen studies examined subjective and objective indicators of women's attachment to and perceptions of their relationships as potential predictors of their decisions to leave. Subjective indicators of commitment and other relationship-specific processes, such as satisfaction, emotional attachment, or feelings of love for partners, consistently demonstrate associations with decisions to leave. Six studies show that women who possess less love for their partners, report lesser satisfaction, emotional attachment or commitment intend to terminate their relationships more often than do women with positive perceptions of their partners and relationships (Bauserman & Arias, 1992; Gortner et al., 1997; Griffing et al., 2002; Katz et al., 1995; Strube & Barbour, 1983; 1984). Katz et al. (1995) reported a large effect for marital satisfaction and stability (r=.62). Bauserman and Arias (1992) additionally found that, among victimized wives, failed attempts to resolve conflict in their marriages additionally increased desires to terminate relationships. Objective indicators, such as the length of relationships or marital status, demonstrate less consistent results. For example, five studies show that women who are involved in shorter-term relationships report increased intentions to leave (Compton et al., 1989; Hilbert & Hilbert, 1984; Snyder & Scheer, 1981; Strube & Barbour, 1983; 1984), whereas three studies show no association between relationship length and termination decisions (Frisch & MacKenzie, 1991; Martin et al., 2000; Okun, 1988; Rounsaville, 1978). However, Gordon et al. (2004) found that women who report lesser constraint, as measured by objective indicators (e.g., number of children, shared property) *and* subjective ones (e.g., social pressures, availability of alternatives, morality of divorce) more often choose to terminate relationships (medium effect size=.30).

Fully 20 studies examined empirical relations between women's exposure to violence, as determined by its frequency or severity, and their decisions to leave. Interestingly, these studies demonstrate equivocal results with some suggesting that victimized women respond to increasing levels of violence and psychological abuse by terminating their relationships (Compton et al., 1989; Gelles, 1976; Gordon et al., 2004; Herbert et al., 1991; Hilbert & Hilbert, 1984; Hilbert et al., 1997; Horton & Johnson, 1993; Pape & Arias, 2000; Rounsaville, 1978; Schwartz, 1988) and others showing either the opposing association (Johnson, 1992; Pagelow, 1981) or no association (Aguirre, 1985; Gondolf, 1988; Johnson, 1992; Okun, 1988; Schwartz, 1988; Snyder & Scheer, 1981). In spite of ambivalent evidence, however, it is generally agreed that these data support the "common sense" hypothesis (Gelles, 1976), which states that more frequent exposure to violence and abuse (and subsequent decreases in reconciliation and remorse) increases the likelihood that women will leave (see Holtzworth-Munroe, Smultzer, & Sandin, 1997, for review). In fact, studies in support of the common sense hypothesis report effect sizes ranging from .23 to .51, which are indicative of medium to large size effects. Plus, recent evidence suggests that the extent of psychological abuse may be even more predictive of women's decisions than is the extent of physical violence (Gortner et al., 1997).

Unfortunately, the relative importance of the empirical factors in predicting and understanding relationship termination decisions remain uncertain due to methodological problems inherent in this type of research. Findings are often complicated by measurement, design, and sampling issues (see Strube, 1988, for review), which prohibit comparison across studies, preclude inferences about causality, and restrict generalizability across samples. In particular, the measurement of women's decisions to leave requires expensive longitudinal data that is often extremely

difficult to obtain in highly mobile groups (Sullivan, Rumptz, Campbell, Eby, & Davidson, 1996). As a consequence, most studies have often relied on cross-sectional measurement of women's intentions to terminate their violent relationships upon exiting shelters. Unfortunately, recent data show that women living in shelters often underestimate the likelihood that they will return to their abusive partners, and they tend to perceive few obstacles to making their separation permanent, irrespective of their difficulties with maintaining separation in the past (Griffing et al., 2002; Martin et al., 2000). Furthermore, most studies use nonexperimental designs that allow for greater external validity (by assessing factors in a naturalistic setting), but limit an improved understanding of causal mechanisms. Although this lack of control is less than ideal from a scientific standpoint, answering these types of questions using an experimental design can be challenging (e.g., unable to randomly assign women to victimized and nonvictimized groups). Finally, most studies rely on data from samples of severely victimized women residing in domestic violence shelters. Thus, it is not clear whether findings can be generalized across different samples of victimized women (e.g., less severely victimized women, women from the community, women experiencing bidirectional violence, women of higher socioeconomic groups, etc.).

In spite of limitations, current data point to several preliminary conclusions. Across the many studies examined, it appears as though violent relationship termination is likely a multi-determined decision process; it cannot be explained exclusively by one factor, such as women's exposure to violence in the present or past. Certainly, these factors are the ones most often examined by violence researchers interested in assisting victimized women (Anderson & Saunders, 2003); yet, studies show that other factors, namely women's economic advantages or constraints, coping strategies and perpetrator behavior, likely exert greater influence on their termination decisions than does the extent of their victimization.

It has also been recognized, based on these data, that relationship termination decisions may not be static resulting in a categorical outcome (Dutton, 1992). Terminating violent relationships is more likely a dynamic change process, requiring multiple attempts and separations prior to final termination. Therefore, the act of terminating one's intimate relationship may be quite similar, in terms of process, to other decisional behaviors. In fact, some have argued that women involved in violent relationships undergo a predictable stage of change process (Frasier, Slatt, Kowlowitz, & Glowa, 2001) similar to those studied among health behaviorists (Prochaska & Diclemente, 1983). Therefore, a stage of change approach, which acknowledges that women may differ in terms of their readiness for change, potentially facilitates improved measurement of the outcome of interest (i.e., relationship termination) and acknowledges the true complexities of women's personal, relational and environmental experiences.

1.4. Importance of theory

These conclusions, though preliminary, potentially direct future research efforts toward productive avenues for further inquiry. Yet, we maintain that testing more factors, in the absence of theory, will not add substantively to existing research. Many sciences, including the psychological sciences, promulgate what is known as "naïve empiricism," which emphasizes the accumulation of random and unconnected facts resulting in incoherent bodies of scientific knowledge (Strong, 1991). In contrast, theory-driven science provides necessary coherence among factors and suggests potential hypotheses to test (Strong, 1991). It allows researchers to reexamine the "empirically supported factors" based on probable interrelationships among them.

Other than providing an organizational framework, theoretical approaches also assist researchers in understanding the meaning behind data (Strong, 1991). For example, termination studies have demonstrated, to some extent, that women who attain higher levels of education leave their relationships more often than do women who do not attain higher levels of education (Frisch & MacKenzie, 1991; Rusbult & Martz, 1995; Schutte et al., 1988); yet, the meaning behind these data may not be clear. It might suggest that more educated women, with presumably greater cognitive and problem-solving abilities, negotiate the process of terminating more effectively, or it might suggest that more educated women possess or have better access to higher-paying employment. Given the demonstrated importance of income and employment, women's level of education most likely impacts their termination decisions by increasing their employment opportunities; however, atheoretical research does not allow for these types of conclusions. In contrast, applying theoretical paradigms, which often postulate causal relations among factors, allows researchers to look for meaning within patterns of empirical relationships. To promote this goal, we review and critique several theories that may explain the complicated and challenging process of terminating violent relationships.

2. Theories to explain the process of terminating violent relationships

Michael Strube (1988), in his influential critique and review, identified four theories (*learned helplessness*, *psychological entrapment*, *investment model*, and *reasoned action/planned behavior*) that may explain the process of terminating violent relationships. We review these as well as other novel approaches, including *traumatic bonding* (Dutton & Painter, 1981) and the *two-part decision-making model* (Choice & Lamke, 1997). We organized the following section by first describing each theoretical approach in brief, addressing theoretical strengths and weaknesses (i.e., in terms of comprehensiveness, generalizability, parsimony, testability, ability to account for individual differences, accurate reflection of dynamics unique to violent relationships, and grounded in larger theoretical literatures), and concluding with direct empirical evidence examining the theories.

We begin with a discussion of the theories of *learned helplessness* and *traumatic bonding* as these theories both emphasize the dynamics and negative consequences of partner violence as explanations for victimized women's decision-making behavior. We label these theories "violence-specific" theories due to their focus on victimization as a unique experience likely to influence women's termination decisions. In contrast, *reasoned action/planned behavior*, the *investment model*, and *psychological entrapment* represent more general approaches to understanding decisional processes, common among all people, irrespective of their exposure and reactions to partner violence. To date, it is not known whether victimized women need a special set of theories to explain their decisional processes or whether more general approaches will suffice. We conclude this section with an overview and evaluation of the *two-part decision-making model*, as this theoretical paradigm attempts to integrate ideas and concepts found within both the general and violence-specific theories.

2.1. Learned helplessness

One of the most influential psychosocial theories, *learned helplessness* (Seligman, 1975), is most often discussed within the clinical literature on depression; however, Lenore Walker (1979), in her groundbreaking work, "The Battered Woman", applied its basic tenets to explain certain behaviors commonly seen in battered women. She posited that learned helplessness might explain some women's demonstration of passivity and dependence in their relationships following abusive events (Walker, 1983). According to Walker, passivity and dependence, though potentially beneficial in temporarily reducing partner violence, likely interfere with other efforts that may serve to extricate women permanently from their abusive partners (e.g., efforts to terminate the relationship).

Specifically, a learned helplessness approach theorizes that battered women who continue to experience partner violence, in spite of their attempts to control or ameliorate violent situations, expect that their future responses aimed at improving the relationship (and reducing violence) will similarly yield violent consequences (see Strube, 1988, for review). These expectations lead some victimized women to develop deficits in motivation, cognition (i.e., problem-solving deficits), and affect (i.e., symptoms of depression) depending on the attributions made for the violence experienced (Abramson, Seligman, & Teasdale, 1978). In other words, women who attribute abuse/violence to internal (e.g., "I caused the violence"), stable (e.g., "The abuse will never end"), and global (e.g., "I am abused in all areas of my life") causes are those who develop "classic" learned helplessness deficits (Strube, 1988). These deficits, all thought to be common psychological consequences of repeated abuse, collectively serve to maintain women's violent relationships and reduce the likelihood of relationship termination.

2.1.1. Strengths and weaknesses

Learned helplessness is one of the most often cited theories used to explain women's psychological reactions to partner violence; therefore, it appears to possess substantial clinical and intuitive appeal to those working in the field. It is based upon learning and reinforcement principles of behavior and has been used as a means of understanding deficits associated with clinical depression (a common problem among victimized women). It also accounts for individual differences in behavior, largely due to the proposition that attributions influence learned helplessness outcomes. Based on this, it is conceivable that two women exposed to similar levels of partner violence may not necessarily respond in an identical manner to that experience.

Despite these strengths, learned helplessness may not adequately explain "how" some victimized women manage to leave their violent relationships. Although it potentially provides an explanation for *internal* barriers preventing relationship termination (i.e., deficits in motivation, cognition or affect), learned helplessness does not acknowledge

external barriers that may interfere (e.g., lack of adequate resources). It also does not capture the possibility that some victimized women may be relatively satisfied with their relationships, preferring to remain; instead, it assumes that all victimized women would choose to leave violent partners if they could. This means that some of the atheoretical empirical factors, suggesting the relevance and importance of external resources and relationship satisfaction in predicting termination decisions, may not be adequately captured by a learned helplessness approach. In a similar manner, learned helplessness does not account for some women's decisions to return to violent partners following a separation or break-up. Finally, and most importantly, most empirical studies do not find an inverse association between violence exposure and women's intent and/or attempts to terminate relationships, as a learned helplessness approach might postulate. This is interesting and noteworthy, particularly if one considers that most of the women sampled for these studies report experiencing high levels of severe violence (i.e., battered women living in shelters). It would be expected that such women would be the most susceptible to suffering the negative outcomes associated with learned helplessness; yet, atheoretical studies consistently demonstrate a lack of learned helplessness behavior (i.e., as evidenced by increased intentions to terminate) among such women.

2.1.2. Research relevant to the theory

It is argued that current evidence supports the effects of learned helplessness on some behaviors/outcomes common among those who are victimized (Kuhl, 1985). For example, several studies examine victimized women's coping strategies, problem-solving capacities, and depressive affect as indicators of learned helplessness deficits. In general, it is found that victimized women, relative to nonvictimized women, demonstrate a greater tendency toward less active coping strategies and more passive strategies (see Barnett & LaViolette, 1993, for review). Battered women residing in shelters also spent less time on and reported fewer options in response to problem-solving tasks than did non-battered women (Launius & Lindquist, 1988). In addition, there is much research to support the notion that most battered women develop feelings of low self-esteem and depression following their exposure to partner abuse and violence (e.g., see Jasinski & Williams, 1998, for review).

In contrast, research examining the effect of learned helplessness on women's relationship decisions contradicts the theory's predictions. These studies tend to show that women who experience more violence report higher levels of learned helplessness; yet, in conjunction with more learned helplessness, women often report *increased* attempts (not decreased as might be expected) to obtain outside support and professional help with managing their violent relationships (see Barnett & LaViolette, 1993, for review; Wilson, Vercella, Brems, Benning, & Renfro, 1992). Furthermore, in the only study explicitly examining the role of learned helplessness in relation to victimized women's relationship termination decisions, Walker (1983) found that women who remained with their abusive partners demonstrated a statistical trend toward *lower* levels of learned helplessness (not greater as would be expected) than did women who left.

2.2. Traumatic bonding

The theory of *traumatic bonding* (Dutton & Painter, 1981) attempts to explain a psychosocial process wherein battered women and others (e.g., hostages, cult members, abused children) develop strong emotional bonds or attachments to those who physically abuse them. It is thought that these emotional bonds partially develop as a consequence of a power imbalance between perpetrator and victim. For example, partner violent men who assert coercive authority over their female partners frequently cause partners to identify with their aggressors' negative view of them (i.e., low self-esteem); this process is similar to what social psychologists refer to as reflected appraisal, or the "looking glass self," whereby we come to internalize the views of us held by significant others (Cooley, 1902). Such feelings engender a belief system in which women perceive themselves as incapable of caring for themselves. This power imbalance consequently creates a symbiotic relationship wherein each becomes both dependent and attached to each other, such that neither leaves the relationship (see Dutton, 1995, for further information). This power-dependency dynamic is additionally characterized by intermittent periods of negative (i.e., abuse) and positive (i.e., apologies, affection) male partner behaviors, which serve as two powerful sources of reinforcement. Dutton theorizes that women experience high levels of aversive negative arousal upon exposure to their partners' violent behavior. This arousal subsides following the violence, with this reduction in arousal serving as a powerful negative reinforcer. During the periods of relative calm and reconciliation that follow a violent episode, often characterized by "positive" partner behaviors including apologies, guilt and self-recrimination, these

positive behaviors act as positive reinforcers. Dutton and Painter theorize that, as this cycle repeats itself, victimized women become increasingly attached to their abusers and the reinforced response (i.e., remaining in the relationship) increases. Dutton and Painter further theorize that if victimized women do leave, traumatic bonding will predict which women eventually return. In fact, it is thought that attachment increases following separation, such that traumatically bonded women dramatically shift their focus from their partner's violent behavior to "the desirable aspects of the relationship" (Dutton & Painter, 1993, p. 109). It is this change in focus that often causes women to return.

2.2.1. Strengths and weaknesses

As a theory, traumatic bonding possesses a number of strengths, particularly in that it speaks to the unique dynamics present in abusive relationships (e.g., cycle of violence). It has long been acknowledged that partner violence often cycles through specific abuse/reconciliation phases (Walker, 1979) much like those described by this theoretical approach. Furthermore, traumatic bonding draws on research evidence from other fields of inquiry (e.g., animal literature, behavioral principles) and states that this phenomenon is not unique to women involved in violent relationships; it also explains the unlikely behavior among many types of interpersonally traumatized people. Further, traumatic bonding, unlike learned helplessness, claims that it is best suited for explaining victimized women's supposed "paradoxical" decisions to return to a violent partner after they have already left (Dutton & Painter, 1993). This prediction is consistent with data suggesting that women often leave and return to violent partners multiple times prior to termination.

On the other hand, traumatic bonding, as theorized, likely accounts for a minority of violent relationships in which highly controlling men physically assault their female partners (i.e., patriarchal terrorism). Such relationships are mostly found among males court-mandated to batterer interventions and shelter samples of victimized women (Johnson, 1995), not the general population. Therefore, traumatic bonding may not explain relationship decisions among women who do not experience physical violence (i.e., psychologically abusive relationships) or those of couples who engage in "common couple violence" (i.e., men and women engaging in low levels of violent behavior toward one another). Furthermore, the idea that increased intermittent violence decreases the chances of relationship termination has not been supported by atheoretical empirical evidence. In fact, it could be argued that current data on women's exposure to violence and their relationship termination decisions contradicts this idea (i.e., Anderson & Saunders, 2003); however, it should be noted that most studies examining women's exposure to violence do not measure its intermittency, only its frequency and/or severity.

2.2.2. Research relevant to the theory

Dutton and Painter (1993), in their preliminary quantitative study of traumatic bonding theory (see also qualitative study by Painter & Dutton, 1985), demonstrated that power shifts and intermittent abuse predicted the level of post-separation attachment among 50 physically battered women and a control group of 25 emotionally abused women. Results showed that empirical associations between relationship dynamics (i.e., power shifts and intermittent abuse) and attachment were stronger at 6-month follow-up relative to the initial assessment as demonstrated by regression weights (e.g., 41% of variance at time 1 versus 55% of variance at time 2); however, these variances were not statistically compared. Moreover, the authors did not control for attachment scores at time 1 in the second analysis, rendering their conclusions regarding the importance of relationship dynamics in predicting later attachment unclear. With this information, the authors argue that their investigation supports the "elastic band" analogy of traumatic bonding theory (Dutton & Painter, 1993, p. 117); yet, as noted, there were several important analytic weaknesses that limit such conclusions. Furthermore, results of these analyses do not necessarily support a traumatic bonding approach to predicting women's relationship termination decisions. First and foremost, the authors chose to limit their sample to women who were separated from their abusers at the time of the initial interview. While this is not necessarily problematic (in that traumatic bonding is thought to predict who will return), follow-up data demonstrated that only 4 women returned to live with their abusive partners, and no attachment scores were provided for women who returned. Thus, it is not known whether women who returned reported greater attachment than those who did not. Moreover, women's attachment scores decreased at 6-month follow-up, not increased as might be expected. Furthermore, this study did not test relationship termination decisions; it tested "attachment," which according to the authors, may not even be "...directly related to whether the women stayed in or left the relationship" (Dutton & Painter, 1993, p. 110).

2.3. Reasoned action/planned behavior

The theories of *reasoned action* and *planned behavior* (Ajzen, 1985; Ajzen & Fishbein, 1980; Ajzen & Madden, 1986; Fishbein & Ajzen, 1975) have been used to successfully predict and explain a wide variety of decisional behaviors (e.g., decision to use a condom, quit smoking, etc.), but have been minimally applied within the partner abuse field. Together, these approaches attempt to predict and understand behavioral intentions as necessary precursors to behavioral action. As might be expected, the two are interrelated, and planned behavior represents an extension of the original reasoned action paradigm (i.e., Ajzen, 1985; Ajzen & Madden, 1986).

When applied to victimized women, reasoned action essentially states that women intend to stay or leave violent relationships (i.e., behavioral intentions) depending on their outcome expectancies and social norm. Outcome expectancies are based on women's evaluation of the costs versus benefits involved in terminating. Women who determine that that the costs of terminating (e.g., increased risk for violence; lesser ability to financially support children) outweigh potential rewards (e.g., greater freedoms) should indicate that they intend to remain involved with partners. In the same manner, women whose important and influential social networks (i.e., social norm) encourage reconciliation should report preferring to remain involved with partners as well.

Planned behavior, an extension to reasoned action, states that women likely encounter internal and/or external barriers preventing them from terminating their relationships. In other words, the act of leaving a violent relationship may not entirely be within women's ability to control. Thus, the theory of planned behavior states that not only are outcome expectancies and social norms important, but so is the concept of perceived behavioral control. For example, in the case of victimized women, some may lack adequate alternative housing, possess limited financial sources, and/or may be unable to afford daycare facilities or babysitting services for their children. As a consequence, such women may report being "stuck" in violent relationships in spite of maintaining relatively positive attitudes toward terminating and having a support network that encourages it.

2.3.1. Strengths and weaknesses

Relative to the other theories identified, reasoned action/planned behavior has been extensively studied within the decision-making realm of human behavior. It is a widely applicable decisional theory based on empirically supported psychological principles (i.e., cost–benefit), and it assumes that the decision to leave, like many decisions, is based on many sources of information and resources available to women. It recognizes the potential impact of women's social networks on their decision-making, a factor previously unacknowledged by other approaches. Moreover, the theory of reasoned action has been extended, above and beyond the constructs initially identified, which may contribute important ideas or hypotheses not previously investigated within the spouse abuse domain (see Bagozzi, 1992 or Sheeran & Abraham, 2003 for information on moderating factors). Furthermore, it is conceivable that such an approach could explain many of the empirically supported factors previously discussed. For instance, exposure to violence is likely perceived as a negative outcome (i.e., cost) associated with remaining in the relationship, such that it would potentially increase women's intentions to leave. Women's attributions for their partner's violent behavior might similarly impact outcome expectancies. If women were to perceive that their partner's violence was unlikely to change (i.e., stable), then they may believe that terminating their violent relationships should produce better outcomes than remaining involved. This model may additionally be able to account for the impact of other empirical factors, such as positive or negative perpetrator behaviors or the apparent importance of external resources. It also lends itself well to understanding women's decisions to return to their violent partners as attitudes or outcome expectancies may change following separation.

To the extent that social norms or other moderating factors, such as self-schemas, intention strength, or anticipated regret (see Sheeran & Abraham, 2003, for more information), are unnecessary for the prediction of women's termination decisions, reasoned action/planned behavior may be unnecessarily complicated. As an approach to understanding relationship decisions, it lacks compelling information on the dynamics of interpersonal relationships, as it is a general theory of decision-making, not a relationship-specific one. In this way, it may not be as intuitive or understandable to clinicians or advocates working in the field.

2.3.2. Research relevant to the theory

Among the theories originally identified, Strube (1988) argued that this approach held the most promise as an explanation for women's decisions to terminate and as an intervention aide. Unfortunately, much like the other

theoretical approaches discussed, very few empirical tests of this approach exist. In fact, there is but one study, which showed that the theory of planned behavior accounted for 69% of shelter women's intentions to leave violent relationships following their shelter stay (Byrne & Arias, 2004). Both outcome expectancies and perceived behavioral control exerted unique and statistically significant effects on women's intentions to leave. Interestingly, the influence of women's social networks, a unique feature of this approach, did not add much variance to the prediction. Regrettably, this study measured women's intentions in a one-time cross-sectional assessment. Although the authors argue that behavioral intentions and actual behavior tend to be moderately associated, women may have overestimated their intention or ability to leave (Griffing et al., 2002; Martin et al., 2000).

2.4. The investment model

The *investment model* (Rusbult, 1980) emerged from Interdependence Theory (Kelly & Thibaut, 1978; Thibaut & Kelley, 1959), which asserts that an analysis of the interdependent processes within relationships (i.e., interactions between partners) provides more information about the stability of relationships than does an analysis of personal dispositions or characteristics (e.g., self-esteem) (Rusbult, Martz & Agnew, 1998). It essentially states that victimized women, like all individuals, become committed to relationships to the extent that important needs (i.e., financial security, intimacy) cannot be met successfully without them. It is thought that feelings of commitment develop as a consequence of three factors, relationship satisfaction, quality alternatives, and investments. Relationship satisfaction refers to the cost/benefit ratios inherent in women's current relationships, and quality alternatives refer to the cost/benefit ratios inherent in all alternative relationships (e.g., alternative partner, friends, family, no partner). Investments refer to the magnitude and relative importance of psychological (e.g., time, energy, effort) and material resources (e.g., shared property and children) bound to relationships that may be lost if relationships were to end. Together, women's feelings of commitment are thought to be the sum of the relationship-specific factors thought to influence its development. The overall model is represented by the following equation: COM = SAT − ALT + INV and states that women who report feeling satisfied, possess lower quality alternatives, and have more invested in current relationships, tend to feel more strongly committed and less inclined to leave.

2.4.1. Strengths and weaknesses

The investment model draws on broader social psychological theory and empirical literature examining the nature and dynamics of interpersonal relationships (see Rusbult, 1991, for review), including heterosexual dating and married relationships, homosexual relationships, and friendships. Therefore, unlike other theories, this approach is a general approach to understanding *relationship* decision-making and uses relationship-specific constructs to determine that decision. Furthermore, its construct of commitment potentially explains the "back and forth" process of terminating and returning commonly seen among victimized women. For example, some victimized women may *not be committed* to their relationships, but choose to "stay" due to safety concerns. As concerns about safety lessen, feelings of commitment may increase. Other victimized women may *be committed* to their relationships, choose to "leave" (e.g., battered women living in shelters), yet remain in continued contact with partners hoping to reconcile. As their attempts at nonviolent reconciliation fail, their feelings of commitment may decrease. Thus, this approach and its construct of commitment allow researchers to conceptualize the termination of violent relationships, not as a static outcome, but rather as a dynamic process. Finally and perhaps most importantly, this approach also potentially accounts for much of the atheoretical data on relationship termination, including data specific to relationship dynamics (e.g., love or positive feelings toward partners, etc.).

Unlike other approaches, the investment model clearly states that dynamic, interactive processes influence women's decision-making more than individual differences do; yet, there may be individual factors (e.g., PTSD diagnosis, depressive symptoms or head injury) common among victimized women that might affect termination. To the extent that this theory cannot account for important ideographic indicators of women's decisions to leave, it may not represent the most comprehensive approach.

2.4.2. Research relevant to the theory

In terms of empirical support, the investment model has been examined extensively among relationship researchers, and it has been shown to predict approximately half the variance in decisions to leave within a wide

variety of samples, including victimized samples (Le & Agnew, 2003). With regard to victimized samples, Rusbult and Martz (1995) examined the factors within the model by investigating archival data available on battered women living in domestic violence shelters. Their analyses showed that proxy estimates of women's satisfaction, alternatives and investments uniquely contributed to the prediction of commitment, and commitment predicted relationship termination decisions 1 year following a shelter stay. In another study involving battered women living in shelters, Rhatigan and Axsom (in press) similarly demonstrated support for the model and also found that relationship satisfaction mediated the association between violence exposure and commitment. Truman-Schram, Cann, Galhoun, and Vanwallendael (2000) showed that positive feelings for one's partner (i.e., satisfaction), perceived alternatives, objective and subjective investment size collectively predicted college women's commitment to violent dating relationships; however, no differences in commitment were found between those who remained in their relationships and those who left. Within a sample of college women, Rhatigan and Street (2005) showed that the investment model predicted behavioral intentions to leave dating relationships equally well among women who were victimized by male dating partners and those who were not. Rhatigan, Moore, and Stuart (2005) found that the model predicted approximately 63% of the variance in intentions to leave violent relationships among women court-mandated to violence intervention programs for their perpetration of partner violence. Taken together, studies have consistently demonstrated support for the Investment model among different samples of victimized women, and one study has shown support for the model in predicting actual stay/leave behavior over time (e.g., Rusbult & Martz, 1995).

2.5. Psychological entrapment

The final theory presented by Strube, *psychological entrapment* (Brockner & Rubin, 1985), suggests that women escalate their commitment to abusive relationships, even as abuse continues, in order to justify prior attempts to make the relationship work. Entrapment is thought to be an exercise in effort justification (Aronson & Mills, 1959) in which women actively continue to invest resources into their relationships, even as violence continues, to justify or "make good on" prior investments (Brockner & Rubin, p. 5). Strube (1988) outlines and explains the five conditions necessary for victimized women to become psychologically entrapped in their intimate relationships: victimized women must actively attempt to maintain their relationships, continue their efforts in spite of violence received, question the benefit of their continued efforts, acknowledge the choice involved in deciding whether or not they should maintain their relationships, and recognize that the costs associated with making that decision may be substantial.

Psychological entrapment provides a unique, cognitive dissonance-based understanding of victimized women's relationship termination decisions. That is, it is thought that victimized women likely experience tension and conflict in response to the lack of consistency between their thoughts (i.e., "He's violent and I don't deserve this") and their behavior (i.e., remaining in the relationship). To resolve or reduce this dissonance, the theory states that women will minimize the negative effects of their partners' violence or overemphasize his contributions to the relationship. They will, in effect, find ways to justify their decision to remain involved with violent partners.

2.5.1. Strengths and weaknesses

As Strube (1988) notes, psychological entrapment may potentially explain women's early responses to their partners' violent behavior and/or typical responses to lower level violence, such as psychological abuse. Furthermore, many of the moderators shown to influence psychological entrapment continue to possess clinical and intuitive appeal especially to those working with victimized women (e.g., effect of low self-esteem, influence of role models, attributions, self-worth determined by ability to maintain relationship, etc.) (see Strube, 1988, for review of moderators).

In terms of atheoretical studies, however, current evidence suggests that women likely take more of a cost/benefit approach to evaluating their relationships as opposed to dissonance-based one. In other words, it has been shown repeatedly that severely victimized women do not minimize the violence they experience; they recognize it as a significant drawback and often attempt relationship termination. Furthermore, psychological entrapment does not provide a context within which to understand the very significant impact of external resources or the role of perpetrator behaviors. Moreover, it has been suggested that victimized women and others likely become entrapped if they continue to invest resources in relationships despite declining satisfaction and alternatives (see Rusbult,

1991, for explanation). This suggests that the ideas and/or hypotheses discussed as part of the psychological entrapment model may be explained by other theoretical approaches (albeit for different reasons, i.e., investment model). Finally, it is unclear whether psychological entrapment could account for the back and forth process commonly seen in victimized women struggling to end their violent relationships.

2.5.2. Research relevant to the theory

It is notable that nothing has been published testing this theoretical approach using victimized samples, and it has not been embraced as an explanation for victimized women's relationship termination decisions among partner violence researchers.

2.6. Two-part decision-making model

This theoretical approach (Choice & Lamke, 1997) represents an attempt to integrate the theories originally identified by Strube (1988) in his review (e.g., *learned helplessness*, *reasoned action/planned behavior*, *investment model*, and *psychological entrapment*). It identifies and highlights areas of overlap among the theories (e.g., investment, resources and barriers, cost–benefit) and adds unique components of each (e.g., social norm) in an attempt to integrate many of the ideas put forth by the original theories. It begins with two questions, which are thought to capture the process women likely undergo as they evaluate their relationships. The first question, "Will I be better off?," is determined by constructs found within the reasoned action/planned behavior, investment model, and psychological entrapment theories. It is comprised of four factors, satisfaction, alternatives, investments and social norms; all of which contribute to women's evaluation of the costs versus benefits involved in terminating their violent relationships. The second question, "Can I do it?," is determined by constructs found within the learned helplessness and reasoned action/planned behavior theories. It is comprised of personal barriers (i.e., deficits associated with learned helplessness) and structural barriers (i.e., an inability to gain access to resources, such as higher-paying employment or adequate childcare). Based on women's assessment of these barriers, they may or may not feel confident about terminating despite believing that it would be better to do so.

2.6.1. Strengths and weaknesses

Taken together, this approach adds to existing theoretical literature by acknowledging the potential impact of many factors, such that it may add substantively to our understanding and ability to predict relationship termination decisions of victimized women. It represents an intuitive, well-articulated attempt to summarize a complicated theoretical literature. It manages to narrow many potential ideas, hypotheses and competing theories into one overarching perspective.

However, in so doing, certain pieces of earlier theories are lost, such as the impact of violence on women's decisions as described by a learned helplessness approach (i.e., more violence leading to fewer intentions to leave) or the decisional conflict and dissonance experienced by entrapped decision-makers. Moreover, this approach assumes that all the theories identified by Strube are relevant and important to understanding women's decision-making, in spite of little empirical evidence supporting some of them. It also does not adequately articulate its constructs, particularly the two questions central to the theory. These ideas would be better understood and more easily testable if operationalized as psychological constructs rather than questions (e.g., instead of "Can I do it?," use Bandura's, 1997a,b concept of self-efficacy). Although its attempt to be comprehensive is impressive, this theoretical approach may lack parsimony, as some of its constructs may be folded into one another. For example, the construct of quality alternatives assumes that women subjectively evaluate the costs of an alternative relationship (or no relationship at all) versus its potential benefits. Presumably, that evaluation is based, to some extent, on women's assessment of personal and structural barriers. If this were true, then it is possible that the two-part decision-making model could be reduced to the ideas put forth by the investment model.

2.6.2. Research relevant to the theory

More recently, the authors of the two-part model attempted to evaluate their integrated approach (see Choice & Lamke, 1999). Results demonstrated evidence in support of the first question, "Will I be better off?," among 126 male and female college students reporting at least one act of violence committed against them by a partner.

However, measurement of the second question, "Can I do it?," was less than ideal, which ultimately prohibited an evaluation of its contribution to termination intentions. Moreover, in the course of their analysis, the authors did not evaluate the relative contribution of each individual factor or how they relate to one another (e.g., whether the first question influences the second, or whether the second influences the first via rationalization). Therefore, it is unknown whether all the constructs add substantively to the prediction of intentions or whether/how the factors relate to one another.

3. Summary of theoretical review

In terms of overall empirical evidence, testability and generalizability, it appears as though general theories, most particularly the investment model and reasoned action/planned behavior approaches, demonstrate greater promise in predicting termination decisions than do the violence-specific theories. First and foremost, the impact of violence as outlined by the violence-specific theories is not supported by atheoretical empirical data (e.g., women respond to increasing violence by terminating their relationships, not remaining involved in them). Rather, women's responses to violence follow the "common sense hypothesis" (i.e., Gelles, 1976), an idea better supported by the general theories. Therefore, it appears as though women's exposure and reactions to the violence they experience may not impact their relationship decisions in the manner once thought. This does not mean that women's exposure to violence and its negative consequences are not important for researchers or clinicians to appreciate and understand. Rather, violence exposure remains critical to this issue; it simply influences women's decisions in a rational manner (i.e., cost/benefit), not in a manner suggested by psychological entrapment, learned helplessness or traumatic bonding.

General approaches also provide more opportunities for researchers to examine factors unrelated to experience of being victimized (e.g., family income) that have been shown to be important for predicting women's decisions to leave. Furthermore, both reasoned action/planned behavior and the investment model employ well-operationalized theoretical constructs and established measurement, increasing the potential success of future research testing these ideas. Beyond these issues, it also appears as though the general approaches are more applicable across different samples of victimized women. Violence-specific theories, in contrast, may explain the experiences of women exposed to frequent, severe physical violence, such as those found in domestic violence shelters, but may not be broadly generalizable to those experiencing mutual violence, low infrequent levels of physical violence, or psychological abuse (see Table 2 for summary).

In addition, the general theories provide a non-pathologized approach to understanding the decisions of women involved in violent relationships. In other words, reasoned action/planned behavior and the investment model are decision-making models that apply to all individuals, not just those involved in problematic relationships. They suggest that victimized women take into account the same types of information in deciding whether or not to terminate their relationships as non-victimized women do. Moreover, the general models suggest that victimized women rationally evaluate the costs versus the benefits of termination; they do not necessarily minimize violence or rationalize their partners' violent behavior (with the exception of psychological entrapment). In contrast, the violence-specific theories, though potentially useful in generating empathy and understanding for victimized women by recognizing the debilitating impact of violence, may serve to disempower women and pathologize their choices. These theories suggest that women develop certain behaviors (e.g., passivity, dependency, professing love, minimizing abuse, or engaging in self-blame) in response to being victimized that may be considered pathological from the perspective of others (Graham et al., 1995). Thus, the violence-specific approaches speculate that victimized women's behaviors, including their decisions to remain involved or terminate their relationships, can only be understood in terms of their victimization, not in general terms and not in the same manner as non-victimized individuals' decisions.

3.1. Future directions

Continued growth within this area of research may be best served by examining the mechanisms or processes that may explain women's termination decisions. To do this most effectively, there is a need to examine theoretical approaches, and the theoretical approach that best explains relationship termination decisions remains an open empirical question. It is our belief, based on current evidence, that the general theories of reasoned action/planned

Table 2
Strengths of theories predicting violent relationship termination

Making	Learned helplessness	Traumatic bonding	Reasoned action/ planned behavior	Investment model	Psychological entrapment	Two-part decision-making
Theory accounts for atheoretical empirical data						
Frequency/severity of violence			×	×		×
History of other abuse	×				×	
External resources		×	×	×		×
Relationship dynamics		×		×	×	×
Cognitive coping	×		×	×		×
Behavioral coping			×	×		×
Offender behaviors			×	×		×
Theory has been empirically tested						
Shown to predict intentions to leave			×	×		×
In multiple studies					×	
Using longitudinal data					×	
In general, theory:						
Can be tested easily			×	×	×	
Is parsimonious	×	×	×	×	×	
Can account for individual differences	×		×		×	×
Is generalizable across groups			×	×	×	×
Is grounded in larger literature	×	×	×	×	×	×

"×" indicates a yes response; however, in some cases, yes responses are generalizations and may not represent subtleties of information presented in text.

behavior and the investment model may be more comprehensive than the violence-specific approaches; yet these theoretical approaches have not been extensively tested using victimized samples. Thus, we advocate for building a firm empirical foundation for these two theories. It may be determined, based on such studies, that one of these approaches provides a better explanation for women's termination decisions. Furthermore, Choice and Lamke's (1997) two-part decision-making model, which attempts to integrate a violence-specific approach (i.e., learned helplessness) with the general theories, has not been tested in such a manner as to reduce its many constructs. It may be useful to determine whether all the constructs, as integrated and defined by this approach, are necessary for the prediction of victimized women's termination decisions.

To answer these questions effectively, better-quality research is needed. It would be preferable for future efforts to sample victimized women from the community and adopt longitudinal designs. However, we recognize that obtaining information on the status of women's relationships at multiple time points is fraught with pragmatic difficulties and ethical concerns. In an effort to address this dilemma, we advocate for improved measurement on the outcome of interest. Rather than exclusively measuring women's intentions, it might be preferable to measure various dimensions of terminating, such as women's desire to leave, ability to leave, and steps women have taken toward that goal. As noted earlier, victimized women may report experiencing various stages along the change continuum prior to relationship termination, including: (1) precontemplation—not aware of or minimizing relationship problems; (2) contemplation—acknowledging problems and considering possible changes; (3) preparation—making plans to leave; (4) action—following through with plans; and (5) maintenance—sustaining changes made. A stage of change approach would allow researchers the ability to measure the degree to which women are ready, willing and able to terminate, rather than simply asking whether they intend to terminate or not. Thus, a stage of change measure focused on the question of relationship termination should provide researchers with a much richer and presumably more accurate assessment of women's later behavior.

3.2. Clinical implications

As noted earlier, encouraging, promoting and facilitating relationship termination is a controversial issue; yet, current theoretical and empirical research has been unable to provide victimized women with many other violence-reducing alternatives. Relationship termination may be the most extreme mechanism by which to protect these women

from continued harm, but it also may be one of the best ways to ensure lesser contact between women and their violent partners. On the other hand, we maintain, as others have suggested (see as example Peled, Eisikovits, Enosh, & Winstok, 2000), that women should be encouraged to make their own choices about whether to remain in or to terminate violent relationships. Taking a paternalistic stance by promoting termination to the exclusion of all other options does not empower women to recognize that their own feelings and choices are legitimate.

In response to victimized women's diverse needs, current approaches to assisting acutely victimized women have primarily been generated by the social work, legal, and medical communities. Within the social work community, efforts have been consistently applied to providing women with safety planning, temporary shelter-based housing, long-term housing, financial assistance, as well as other types of resources or services (e.g., child care). The criminal justice/legal community has often approached this issue by changing laws and arrest policies (e.g., instituting mandatory arrest policies), providing restraining orders, advocating for victims, and offering free or low-cost legal advice. Medical personnel, particularly those working in emergency rooms or women's clinics, have increased their efforts toward reducing rates of partner violence by routinely screening for victimization and referring patients to appropriate service facilities (i.e., local battered women's organizations). While these interventions are very valuable for some women experiencing partner violence, they may not be appropriate for all women. For example, women who remain uncertain as to the best course of action (i.e., staying or leaving) feel unable or unwilling to access housing or support options, or those experiencing lower levels of violence or psychological abuse may benefit somewhat less from these types of interventions than would women more ready or willing to consider change (like separation).

In contrast, the psychological community has largely ignored this question, possibly due to the controversies noted above. Most of the efforts of psychologists have focused on developing and promoting mental health treatments for male batterers or support and trauma-related treatments for victimized women. Unfortunately, these treatments do not provide much assistance to women who continue to struggle with ongoing violence in their relationships. Similarly, couples work focused on promoting nonviolent communication skills may not be therapeutically appropriate for a variety of ethical reasons (see Jasinski & Williams, 1998, for review). Thus, it appears as though the field of psychology, though the most knowledgeable in terms of predicting and understanding human decision-making, has offered the least assistance to acutely victimized women relative to other fields.

Efforts based on a psychological as opposed to a case management or social work perspective have mainly focused on providing victimized women with support and pragmatic advice. Safety planning, which involves creating a specific, prearranged plan for ensuring the safety of women and their children, has become a salient feature of almost all victim interventions (e.g., Dutton, 1992). More recently, with the adoption of the stage of change or transtheoretical model (Prochaska & DiClemente, 1982), Burman (2003) and others have advocated for the use of decisional balance charts to weigh the costs and benefits of remaining involved in or terminating violent relationships. Other interventions techniques used with women in violent situations are based on well-established therapeutic strategies such a providing empathy, active listening, and problem-solving (Roberts, 2000; Sullivan & Bybee, 1999). Even though these strategies are important and most likely helpful, they may not be sufficient and may feel quite limiting to those attempting to assist women in life-threatening and dangerous situations. It is for these reasons that coordinated community action models, or those that integrate legal, social work and mental health services (see as example the Barriers model; Grigsby & Hartman, 1997), may be the most promising (Jasinski & Williams, 1998).

3.3. Application of theories to intervention

By applying and testing theoretical paradigms, psychologists should be able to improve upon existing therapeutic strategies. That is, our intention in reviewing these theories was to assist in the development of effective psychological interventions for acutely victimized women. As such, it is important to recognize that the theories reviewed contain different constructs and at times make different predictions, thereby offering a multitude of strategies. For example, reasoned action/planned behavior states that social norms, or women's support networks, may be integral to their decision-making process. If this idea was supported by theoretical research, future interventions might incorporate supportive friends and relatives into the therapeutic milieu. Therapists might consider providing friends and family with psychoeducation on the causes and consequences of partner violence as well as information on the unique challenges and dangers victims face in attempting to leave their violent partners. Therapists might also teach support techniques that have been shown to be effective in encouraging and promoting behavioral change (e.g., empathy and active listening skills). If, however, social norms were deemed unimportant as preliminary research suggests (i.e.,

Byrne & Arias, 2004), then it would be preferable for therapists to focus their limited time and attention on other types of interventions.

Not surprisingly, a quick comparison across violence-specific and general theories of relationship termination demonstrate striking differences in the types of interventions each might provide. A learned helplessness approach dictates the need to assist women in overcoming the cognitive, motivational, and affective deficits resulting from their exposure to violence. Therapists might attempt to strengthen women's motivation for terminating their relationships with motivational techniques and strategies, teach problem-solving skills, and/or use cognitive-restructuring techniques to combat women's depressed mood. In contrast, an investment model approach would argue for increasing women's alternatives by providing them with much needed resources and/or services (e.g., childcare, transportation, safe housing, etc.). Therapists might additionally discourage women's future investment in violent relationships by advising against the purchase of shared property or any other important resource tied to violent partners. At this point, it is unclear which of these strategies would provide acutely victimized women with the most help and support, largely due to a lack of evaluative research.

4. Overall conclusions

In this review, we attempted to integrate atheoretical and theoretical evidence on victims' relationship termination decisions in an effort to promote productive areas of future inquiry, particularly in regard to current theoretical paradigms. Due to recent empirical evidence, we were able, unlike Strube (1988), to advocate more strongly for the testing of certain theoretical approaches, which should provide the most information and the best strategies for assisting victimized women with their violent relationships. As violence researchers, we attempted to handle this issue with sensitivity and caution, given its controversial nature. Plus, we argued in support of theoretical paradigms that postulate a normal, non-pathological process by which women likely make their decisions.

Like Strube, our primary intention in writing this review was to encourage future theoretical research on this topic. Yet, it is rather striking to us that so little was conducted over the past 15 years, particularly in light of the many benefits of adopting theories (e.g., provides an organizational framework, gives meaning to data, etc.). It is unclear to us, beyond the difficulties involved in conducting research in this area (e.g., obtaining and maintaining participants, ethical concerns, etc.), why this might be. We speculate that it may be partly due to the controversies surrounding the issue of relationship termination, but we also wonder whether there are other types of concerns. For instance, it may be believed that theory-guided research must be experimental or otherwise highly controlled, making such efforts largely inappropriate and ineffective for studying this particular issue. However, as we have noted, not only is it possible to conduct theoretical research in the absence of experimental designs, it is imperative for future researchers interested in this topic to do so. Theoretical research would reduce or prevent the ever-expanding (and increasingly confusing) number of variables postulated as important for understanding women's decisions to remain involved or terminate their violent relationships. In addition, we also wonder whether researchers interested in this issue feel less comfortable adopting the general theories suggested in Strube's original review. It may be believed that general theories, like the investment model or reasoned action/planned behavior, cannot possibly capture the unique experiences of women involved in violent relationships. It may be, for this reason, that learned helplessness has attracted much more attention among clinicians and researchers. Yet, this attention, as this review has shown, may be misdirected. Instead, we need to expand beyond the theories and literatures familiar to us as clinicians, to look to other fields of inquiry, and to examine more general approaches to understanding this important empirical question.

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